

## Wiesel's Memoir and God outside Auschwitz\*

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*Night* records Elie Wiesel's internment at Auschwitz, and it raises questions about God's and humanity's respective roles in the death camps. Today's literary critics and theologians, however, highlight Wiesel's gift for story-telling of his theology and miss the quality of the writer's individual works. Tending to group all of the author's Holocaust stories to illuminate a particular theme, they have failed to recognize that Wiesel's theology in *Night* is manifest only when they perceive "that there is meaning in [it, which] comes only when the elements that go up to make that thing" appear in their relatedness.<sup>1</sup> They do not see that Wiesel's text is a memoir rather than a short story or autobiography, and that the meaning of *Night* is that God makes the conscious choice of turning away from the world when humanity assumes God's role in it.<sup>2</sup> This essay will prove that the book is a memoir rather than an autobiography and, through textual analysis, that Wiesel believes God was inoperative at Auschwitz.

A brief note on Wiesel's attitude toward the Holocaust suggests why *Night* merits examination as an autobiographical act written from a theological perspective. Recently, Wiesel observed that he remains incredulous about his experiences at Auschwitz: "I do not believe it. The event seems unreal, as if it occurred on a different planet."<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the author is concerned with the meaning behind the crucial event in his life, and *Night* reflects his attempt to achieve some degree of understanding. Thus, the book deserves to be analyzed as a testimonial to its author's personal experience in a theologically confusing world.

In a recent book, Karl Weintraub observes that autobiography "is written from a specific retrospective point of view, the place at which the author stands in relation to his cumulative experience when he puts interpretive meaning on his past."<sup>4</sup> When *Night* opens with its remarks about Moche the Beadle, it seems to be a very simple story. But by the third paragraph Wiesel is telling the reader that his acquaintanceship with the curious man began in the closing months of 1941, when the narrator was a devout Jew. The book promises to examine the narrator's religious beliefs<sup>5</sup> through the medium of art. Wiesel works through the particular to reach the abstract; he recounts history to achieve universal truth. He promises insight into "the nature of our own selves and our share in the human condition."<sup>6</sup>

\*Accepted for publication June 3, 1980

As autobiographical literature *Night* reflects what Roy Pascal calls '*Selbstbesinnung*,' a search for one's inner standing."<sup>7</sup> Wiesel's tale is an attempt to analyze history until it "partakes of the recurrence of myth."<sup>8</sup> In fact, the author is participating in ritual by reopening communication with the past and with literary form. Published in 1958, *Night* is Wiesel's first book, which suggests that the writer perceived a somewhat metaphysical urge to understand a past rooted in the events of the Holocaust. Its narrator tries to formulate a philosophy based on that experience. *Night* is a memoir and a *Bildungsroman* centering on the religious awakening of an already religious boy of fifteen. While the term "memoir" has carried with it connotations of informality<sup>9</sup> in this case it has been chosen to reflect serious purposes. The book is a type of autobiographical writing, but not an autobiography, which is slanted toward the individual. Wiesel's memoir moves beyond personal considerations to critical theological issues arising in an irrational universe. The author recognizes that "religion... involves a complex of emotions and relationships and an energetic principle of living."<sup>10</sup> Wiesel's special gift is the ability to synthesize the powers of observer artist and historian theologian.

As a record of Jewish life under Hitler's regime, *Night* has been misread as providing evidence that God has broken the covenant with the Jews. But textual evidence reveals that humanity's betrayal of God leads to unprecedented banality and emptiness. Because the Holocaust is an attack on humanity by humanity, Wiesel's record necessitates "that luminous patterning of which the artist alone is capable... to show us what is significantly human in the destruction of six million people."<sup>11</sup> Textual analysis reveals that humanity has created the evil of the Holocaust by trying to play God.

Wiesel is not concerned primarily with the political issues precipitating the Holocaust or the physical suffering of the Jews. His attention rests squarely on fundamental questions of the human spirit when human beings decide, like God, who will live and who will die. The author's focus is Eliezer, the martyr/hero whose name begins with the prefix "El," the Hebrew word for God, and how unmitigated suffering robs him of his previous belief. *Night* is a spiritual dialectic addressing God's effacement and the dilemma of living when one has confronted ultimate evil and has had to survive without divine intervention. In part, it is Wiesel's Kaddish to his spiritual infancy and the victims of the Holocaust.

*Night* tells the compelling story of the Holocaust as only art can. It is at once historical and beyond history. A memorial to the dead, it is a living reminder of the need to reflect upon history for the insights it bequeathes the present. But it is told in the form of a story, which

suggests to the reader that Wiesel values art for its ability to find ultimate meaning. To personalize that story, he juxtaposes the Holocaust with a child's recollection of his experiences and creates "a curious blend of beauty and suffering."<sup>12</sup> The author's use of the first-person narrative makes his material even more immediate. This technique of memoir also transforms history into an organizing principle for form.<sup>13</sup> The "I" organizes the form of *Night* and, finally, becomes its form.

Wiesel is in dialogue first with the "I" creating the memoir and then with the events of history that lead to a theology. The second dialogue proves more interesting than the first, but too many critics alight on it only briefly and bypass formal considerations. If Wiesel's "message" were intended to be expressed without the aid of metaphor, the author would have exchanged the memoir for an essay or for historical analysis. The autobiographical writing suggests that Wiesel believed his self-actualization could be communicated best through the medium of art. Therefore, it is formal considerations to which we must turn.

Wiesel uses the tools of the consummate artist. Evidence of his technique appears throughout the narrative in comic incongruity, irony, temporal changes, symbolism, imagery, and appropriation of the *Bildungsroman*. While none of these can be separated from Wiesel's theology, the last is completely bound up in it. Comic scenes are created to magnify the tragic quality of the story. As if to underscore the seriousness of his subject, the writer refers to the wish of the Jews of Sighet that Passover end, "so that we should not have to play this comedy any longer."<sup>14</sup> Passover, therefore, has turned into a religious celebration that is completely out of place. Later, after Eliezer is permitted to keep his pair of new mudcoated shoes, he thanks God for "having created mud in his infinite and wonderful universe." (p. 48)<sup>15</sup> Under normal conditions, God is not usually exalted for the mud of the earth, and the universe of *Night* is not "wonderful."

In a world where comedy is incongruous, brutality transforms human beings. Just before the liberating Russian army arrives, for example, the prisoners dress in layers for the evacuation. Wiesel comments, "Poor mountebanks, wider than they were tall, more dead than alive; poor clowns, their ghostlike faces emerging from piles of prison clothes. Buffoons!" (p. 94) This scene is a reminder of the early incident in which the thinnest prisoner swims in his uniform, and the heaviest one is barely covered. But the reader does not laugh at this comedy, because the writer is recounting the life of suffering in a world where reasonable expectations are confounded and where

human responsibility has been abandoned. The boy's world is dreamlike and must be shared through the story-telling impulse: "it was like a page torn from some story book." (p. 26)

If the reader misses the significance of the incongruity, Wiesel adopts irony as a stylistic device to communicate the irrationality of the concentration camp experience. The Jews of Sighet, crammed into a box car travelling to Auschwitz in the spring of 1944, have never heard the name of their destination. In fact, the group is so oblivious to its fate that it believes what it is told: "There was a labor camp. Conditions were good. Families would not be split up. . . . We gave thanks to God." (p. 37) The ultimate irony, thanking God at Auschwitz. Every sentence is clipped and matter-of-fact. Wiesel's genius is clear in his ability to keep the reader as aware of the deception in the "facts" as the Jews are taken in by them.

Irony strikes the reader once again on Yom Kippur, when the starving Jews debate whether they should fast. Some of the prisoners believe that challenging the danger inherent in observing the holiday under the circumstances of the concentration camp would impress God as devout.<sup>16</sup> In this incident "the absurd[emerges as] the breakdown of the accustomed order in God's world, the dissolution of a long established relationship between man and God."<sup>17</sup>

A third narrative device involves changing the shape of the dimension of time. *Night* itself denies temporality the character it usually assumes by repeating history and creating a perspective which shows the author within history and outside of it simultaneously. For the Jews, though, the present alone has meaning, because it is the abnormality, the very brutality of that present with which they must contend in order to survive. From this standpoint, the future and past lose their meaning. This is particularly noticeable in Eliezer's repeated comments about the inactive memories of the prisoners, and the reader's perception that the boy wonders only occasionally what happened to his mother and Tzipora, his little sister.

More particularly, however, the narrator leaps out of his story by presenting an analogous incident which occurred after the camp experience but reinforces its universal qualities. First the author establishes the dreamlike nature of the world by disclosing that Eliezer's senses are blurred when he arrives at Buchenwald. The transtemporal qualities of the Holocaust are disclosed in three specific incidents. The first occurs when Eliezer's father expresses minimal concern for having to wear the yellow star: "The yellow star?

Oh, well, what of it? You don't die of it." Wiesel's aside, "(Poor Father! Of what then did you die?)" (p. 20) comes from the present but **speaks** of oppression against the Jews throughout history.

The second scene is Eliezer's beating by Idek. The child's blood runs and a French girl, who is passing as Aryan and does not speak with other prisoners, tries to comfort him. Although Eliezer is uncertain of the girl's background, the act reinforces his sense of her Jewishness. Wiesel then moves directly to his chance meeting with her on the Metro in Paris many years after the war. The significance of the meeting reflects that "the solidarity of Jewish people is based on the simplest and most courageous of human acts: the communication of one Jew to another that he is a Jew, and thus shares his identity."<sup>18</sup> When the woman affirms their common heritage, the writer attests to the transtemporal dimension of the affirmation.

A more arresting episode occurs during deportation as the Russian front closes. When a German workman throws a piece of bread into the wagon, a boy, like a ravenous wolf, kills his father over the food. And then he is killed by the other men.

But the author demonstrates that the significance of the incident is not isolated to the Holocaust, because he shifts to an experience in Aden some years later. In this particular scene some passengers on a pleasure boat are amused by the reactions of "natives," to whom they are throwing coins. When Wiesel sees two children on the verge of killing each other over some money, he asks a wealthy Parisienne to stop tossing coins overboard. She responds indifferently that she enjoys giving "to...charity." (p. 112) Each of these events illustrates Wiesel's perception that the experience and meaning behind the Holocaust are not confined to the concentration camp alone.

Wiesel's command of symbolism permeates his book. The symbols suggest death, evil, and insight. Each assumes a significance beyond itself and keys the reader into the main theme of the memoir, which is the opening of Eliezer's—and the reader's—eyes to God's dissociation from the events of Auschwitz. Indeed, the symbols in *Night* come to suggest that when humanity assumes responsibility for the Jews or any other group of people, God faces the death of God's creation and therefore moves outside of it.

Death imagery pervades the personal record, and symbols of life are transformed into symbols of death. Before leaving Sighet, for example, the townspeople are shadows whose lives are being drained. They are the goods of the market place, a commodity whose humanity is denied by the events of the Holocaust. In fact, the faded

portraits symbolize the Jews of Sighet whose value has disappeared. Thereafter, the Jews are "dried-up trees, dried-up bodies, numbers, cattle or merchandise, rags, starved stomach[s]." (pp. 47, 74, 63) Depersonalized and dehumanized, they are closest to death when, like the narrator's father struck down by dysentery, they become ghosts.

Even religious symbols hint of death. Altogether, these reflect the Jews' very real concern for their once vital faith. The world of Sighet becomes "an open tomb" (p. 27) leading to death. In such a place there are numerous travesties made upon Judaism. Hitler's agents choose the Sabbath to deport the Jews and the synagogue to detain them. This synagogue the deportees must profane by relieving themselves in it. Then at Birkenau, someone faced with the prospect of dying in the crematorium begins to recite the Kaddish. Wiesel observes poignantly, "I do not know if it has ever happened before, in the long history of the Jews, that people have recited the prayer for the dead for themselves." (p. 43)

Wiesel's imagery is most effective when it illuminates the omnipresence of evil through images and symbols of darkness and light. As in most literature, night stands for evil or death, but here light is distorted to mean the same. Fiery stars foreshadow the crematory ovens. Eliezer asks if his experience is not a nightmare and comes to realize that a series of nights, one "last night" after another, will introduce him to evil. Here he describes the first:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. . . . Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. . . . even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never. (p. 44)

This passage in *Night* incorporates many of the important images used by Wiesel and provides insight into his theology. It shows how the prisoner's days are converted into nights which darken their souls, but that God exists. It makes the light of the furnace satanic, because the furnace stands as a mockery of the candles lighted on the anniversary deaths of loved ones. In fact, the word "furnace" is meaningful as a reflection of the atrocity inflicted upon the Jews. As one theologian has observed, A fire lit by men with the purpose of consuming men strikes at the very heart of creation,"<sup>19</sup> because this

is a world overseen by humanity—not God.

Eyes, Wiesel's most frequently used symbol, direct the reader to the Nazi *Weltanschauung*. In one moving scene, while a little boy called "a sad-eyed angel" (p. 75) is dying an agonizing death symbolic of the cosmic tragedy Wiesel recounts, the prisoners are forced to march in front of him and look directly into his eyes. Theologically, this is one of the most crucial sections of the memoir. Many readers have concluded that the incident symbolizes the death of God, when actually a close reading of *Night* suggests the slow destruction of a tortured child with refined and beautiful features as an act of humanity. When Eliezer says his own eyes are open to a world without God or humanity, he is speaking of Hitler's world. He remains above the bestiality of that world only through the act of reflecting upon it.

The concept of vision is abstracted by three prophets, Moche the Beadle and Madame Schachter, who are the seers capable of providing advance warning to the Jews, and Akiba Drumer, who appears to be a false prophet. The first two are victimized for their appearance of insanity. Moche is cast out; Madame Schachter, labeled insane. The mystic who has cabalistic dreams of the deliverance of the Jews finds a verse in the Bible which may be interpreted to mean that his people will be saved within two weeks. Then the selection determines his fate. Wiesel's message is clear: medieval Jewish mysticism is irrelevant in the concentration camp, because the God of this tradition is not operative there.

Wiesel even enlists the aid of his reader's eyes when his characters may be unable to comprehend the significance of certain relationships. The orphaned Czech brothers who "lived, body and soul, for each other" (p. 61) are virtually inseparable. A rabbi and his son struggle to maintain eye contact. In particular, Eliezer's relationship with his father establishes a new covenant,<sup>40</sup> and the two remain within the sight of each other whenever possible. All of these reflect the author's perception of "the crucial" importance of human relationships in the camps,<sup>41</sup> which lend stability by affirming the importance of the human community in an inhumane world. They also show that God's covenant with God's people is still very much alive.

Still, the hero's perspective on God changes as the boy fights to survive when Nazism assumes God's dominion over the creation. Young Eliezer's spiritual journey is, theologically and literarily, the most interesting part of the memoir. It is central to Wiesel's theology and as such merits analysis. In the beginning, the child is twelve and

an ardent student of the Talmud. At night he goes to the synagogue and weeps "over the destruction of the Temple. . .because of something inside me that felt the need for tears." (pp. 12-13) Eliezer's very being finds expression in prayer. It is an instinctive act, like living and breathing. On his way to the ghetto, he experiences his first hatred toward human beings as "the first of the faces of hell and death" (p. 29) that is, as the creators and perpetrators of an evil world. But he remains able to pray to God for help.

Upon arriving at Birkenau, the child is incredulous at the burning of people and children—and the world's silence at such atrocity. As the *Kaddish* is being recited, he expresses his questioning: if the lord of the Universe is silent, why should he offer thanks to such a ruler? Eliezer's childhood God is murdered that first night: "A dark flame had entered into my soul and devoured it." (p. 47)

Eliezer denounces God on the eve of Yom Kippur by asking, rhetorically, the meaning of God's greatness amid the dying Holocaust victims. He refuses to bless God, because doing so would signify blessing the One who permits the crematorium to consume the Jews. The hero's religious position has not matured completely. Remembering that he was once a mystic who believed that his prayer could save the world, Eliezer decides that humankind is stronger than a God who cannot be understood: "I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone — terribly alone in a *world without God and without man*." (p. 79) Nazism perverts the traditional relationship of God and humanity. On Yom Kippur the boy feels a void after eating, but refusing to fast is his rebellion and protest toward the now forsaken God of his childhood. After all, the child views the camp experience as a Calvary, where sensitive people like Akiba Drumer lose their faith.<sup>22</sup>

The main character's spiritual change progresses when Eliezer begins to see himself "as two (separate) entities — my body and me." (p. 97) This distinction reflects the boy's rejection of the Jewish belief in the unity of flesh and spirit. Marching away from Auschwitz, the child toys with the idea of dying because of death's immunity from physical and spiritual suffering. In a final attempt to make contact with God, he prays to the God he has denounced for strength to protect his father from death. His insincerity is punished by the just God of his childhood, who presides over the son's silent appeal to "get rid of the dead weight." (p. 118) Eliezer is shamed by his own words, and the covenant remains.

Overcome by the evil he encounters, Eliezer is transfixed on two different occasions by his father's being beaten but, like the God of



Auschwitz, is silent. When the prisoners make an effort to sing more Hasidic melodies, speak of God's mysterious ways and the sins of the Jews and their future deliverance, Eliezer announces that he has already stopped praying. He knows the God of Israel will not hear him. He identifies with the tormented Job and does "not deny God's existence, but I doubted His absolute Justice." (p. 56) In transition spiritually, the boy nevertheless believes that God is present.

As Eliezer's father is dying, the son does not respond to a last cry for water and, even in his duplicity, feels free. Transformed spiritually, Eliezer lacks the continued guidance of his traditional God. When he sees himself in the mirror, Eliezer confronts a face marked by death. Stylistically, this scene reiterates the boy's initiation into the death of a once familiar world and thus convolutes the outcome of the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>23</sup>

These incidents reveal Wiesel's perspective on the God of Auschwitz. The memoirist does not deny God's existence: he actually affirms it. We have already seen in the first night experience that Wiesel believes God will always be alive. In fact, Wiesel implies that his God exists *outside* Auschwitz, but not within it, because the Holocaust is not God's creation. God is not ineffective or weak, as Thomas Idinopulos charges, and the Holocaust does not prove that God rules badly.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, Wiesel is not stating forthrightly that God is unjust. Instead, he asserts that God's justice *may not be* (this is different from "isn't") absolute. It is not certain, not necessarily perfect or relative; it may not be ultimate. The eyes of the narrator come to see the concentration camp as a lonely world in which God's justice is not the ruling force.

At one point the prisoners cry simultaneously in all the cars without "knowing against whom we cried. Not knowing why." (p. 115) The men have joined in the acknowledgement of Holocaust victims and the God who stands outside the Holocaust. Wiesel does not pretend to understand Auschwitz here, except as a product of human evil. And in fact, it is precisely at this point that his memoir fascinates us, for it "demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure."<sup>25</sup> The author does not, he cannot explain the relationship between humanity and God that existed there. Nine years after *Night* was published, he said that "the Holocaust... can be explained neither with God nor without Him."<sup>26</sup> Wiesel is not speaking of an immoral or weak God. He avoids such value judgments. As an observer, he records God's conscious inoperativeness in the hell which is the Holocaust. Amid the brutality and suffering the writer

“achieves pathos because his aim is not to shock the mind but rather to convey, through feeling, moral and spiritual knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> The world Eliezer perceives is one in which humanity rules, and Wiesel says there are no answers to the questions of what kind of paradoxical God he portrays. This theological position has not changed, for Wiesel asserted recently:

Those experiences of which I try to speak have no answers, should have no answers. I’m afraid of anyone who comes with a theory, a system, based on that experience. . . . I believe the experience was above and beyond theories and systems and philosophies.<sup>28</sup>

In the end, the recollection of that suffering and its translation into *Night* become at once a *Kaddish* to concentration camp victims and an act of faith toward the God who stood outside Auschwitz. Through memoir, Elie Wiesel invites a communal response to human evil, when humanity creates a structure empowering itself to act like God.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>James Olney. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) 30-31.

<sup>2</sup>This contrasts with a remark of Hamida Bosmajian, who suggests that Eliezer believes that the withdrawal is defensive. See Hamida Bosmajian. *Metaphors of Evil: Contemporary German Literature and the Shadow of Nazism*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979).

<sup>3</sup>Lawrence L. Langer. *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975). 78.

<sup>4</sup>Karl Joachim Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 18.

<sup>5</sup>One critic attributes a specifically religious quality to the autobiography when he observes that “all. . . formulations and facts of religious belief, [sic] are founded deep in autobiography.” Olney. 49.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. 7.

<sup>7</sup>Roy Pascal. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) 182.

<sup>8</sup>Mutlu Konuk Blasing. *The Art of Life: Studies in American Autobiographical Literature*. (Austin: University of Texas, 1977) 19.

<sup>9</sup>Elizabeth W. Bruss. *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976) 7.

<sup>10</sup>Pascal. 102-103.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas A. Idinopulos. "Art and the Inhuman: A Reflection on the Holocaust;" *The Christian Century* Vol. 91 (October 16, 1974) 957.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas A. Idinopulos. "The Holocaust in the Stories of Elie Wiesel;" *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Vol. 55, No. 1 (Spring, 1972) 202.

<sup>13</sup> Blasing explains the transformation by noting that "the 'I' in its self-consciousness constitutes at the same time the historical subject, the shaping form, and the personalizing style of autobiography." Blasing. 13.

<sup>14</sup>Elie Wiesel. *Night*. (New York: Avon Books, 1960), 19. Future references will appear in the text of the article.

<sup>15</sup>Another critic interprets the remark as resembling a curse. See Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi. *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) 122.

<sup>16</sup>The irony is clear when one considers a statement made about "religion [as] the way in which we share our predicament; it is never the way in which we overcome our condition." Richard L. Rubenstein. "Death of God, Theology and Judaism." *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*. (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976) 263. As Wiesel suggests, some Jews of Auschwitz share their predicament by not affirming their beliefs, and there is certainly very little hope of overcoming their condition.

<sup>17</sup>Josephine Knopp. "Wiesel and the Absurd." *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 15, No. 2 (Spring, 1974) 214. Knopp argues convincingly that theologically serious Jews must affirm their relationship with God, or Judaism itself is undermined. *Ibid.* 213. Here we see the debate as a recognition of the covenant and a reiteration of the protestant impulse in the Jewish tradition. Thus, God is not being dissociated from the Holocaust.

<sup>18</sup>Idinopulos. "The Holocaust in the Stories." 210.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid. 200.

<sup>10</sup>Irving Halperin. "Meaning and Despair in the Literature of the Survivors." *Essays on Jewish Booklore*. Philip Goodman, ed. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1971) 160.

<sup>21</sup>George K. Beach speaks of covenants which are difficult "to sustain. . . under conditions that breed cynical disregard for moral obligation" and cites "the concentration camp [as] the extreme case." See George K. Beach. "Covenantal Ethnics." *The Life of Choice: Some Liberal Religious Perspectives on Morality*. Clark Kucheman, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) 125. Frederick Garber suggests, "Eliezer. . .knew. . .that it was only his association with his father that held him above much of the unendurable bestiality. . .Sanctified by tradition, even more than by instinct, the relationship of father and son was all that time's knowledge had left as a possibility and valuable action in the immediate present." Frederick Garber. "The Art of Elie Wiesel." *Judaism* Vol. 22 (Summer, 1973) 302.

<sup>22</sup>This commonplace of the camps reflects the Nazis' ultimate triumph through "the final exasperation of the Jew." David L. Edwards. "The Presence of the Holocaust: The Vision of Elie Wiesel." *Lexington Theological Quarterly*. Vol. 7, No. 1 (January, 1973) 55.

<sup>23</sup>Langer observes, "The ritual incantation which marks his inauguration into *l'univers concentrationnaire* inverts the traditional pattern of autobiography and *Bildungsroman* by beginning with a repudiation that depletes the possibilities of life scarcely after it has begun; it signifies not only a boy's despair, but the exhaustion of meaning in a world henceforth unlike men have ever encountered." Langer. 82. While this phenomenon may appear to be typical of Holocaust literature alone, it conforms to the pattern of Jewish literature, wherein heroism is equated with martyrdom. See Trude Weiss-Marin. "The Heroic Element in Jewish Life and Literature." *Essays in Jewish Booklore*. 106.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas A. Idinopulos. "The Mystery of Suffering in the Art of Dostoevsky, Camus, Wiesel, and Grunewald." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 43, No. 1 (March, 1975) 52, 59. Idinopulos is not alone. One Jewish scholar refers to Jewish protestantism, which began in Genesis 18:25: "Shall the Judge of all the earth do no justice?" Byron L. Sherwin. "Elie Wiesel and Jewish Theology," *Judaism*. Vol. 18 (Winter, 1969) 40.

<sup>25</sup>Paul De Man. "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN*. Vol. 94, No. 5 (December, 1979) 922.

<sup>26</sup>Elie Wiesel. "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future;" *Judaism*. Vol. 16 (Summer, 1967) :281.

<sup>27</sup>Idinopulos. "The Mystery of Suffering." 58.

<sup>28</sup>Harry James Cargas. "Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust." *Commonweal*. Vol. 103, No. 19 (September 10, 1976) 596.

### Critique

It is not exactly a guarded secret that Jews, for three or four thousand years, have questioned who they were, who they are, and who they are going to be as individuals and as members of the various groups within which they associate. And through those many centuries they have often cried out in anguish and ambivalence to their God. Elie Wiesel, who writes with great power and also great agony, is certainly not the first writer to express these themes. Nor is the German Holocaust with all of its unspeakable and unfathomable horrors the first event to evoke these emotions. Having witnessed the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, for example, the prophet Jeremiah, pondered these problems and sent a message to Jews who had been carried off into captivity in Babylon. Essentially Jeremiah's message was that God is everywhere. The significance of this statement, beyond the fire and brimstone of sermons and the finesse of the endless Talmudic debates, is that being Jewish is a matter which transcends time and space and that the values of Judaism are universal. Fundamentally Wiesel says that too, though the pain with which he speaks and the implications of his message are even more horrifying to us because the space and the time about which he speaks are closer at hand.

In her essay focused on Elie Wiesel's book, Culp provides more a book report on *Night* than an interdisciplinary insight into the facts and ramifications of Wiesel's internment at Auschwitz. To be sure *Night* is not considered *in vacuo*. Culp draws on a number of sources, indicated in her notes, in an attempt to demonstrate her basic theses that (1) Wiesel's book is a memoir rather than an autobiography, and (2) that Wiesel believes that God was inoperative at Auschwitz.

Whether Wiesel's book is an autobiography, a memoir, a fictional account, or, for that matter, an ethnographic or sociological study, is a matter of considerable scholarly interest. Discussion of this question